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ABSTRACT

Six doctoral students evaluated an educational leadership program they were in by participating in a focus group simulation. The students were all enrolled in or auditing a qualitative research course at Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education (NAU/CEE). Prior to the simulation participants were given instructions on the process of the group. Participants were to discuss the program's strengths, weaknesses, and make recommendations for improvement in admissions, program of studies, and the dissertation. The same three categories were also measured in a survey completed by all six respondents. The session met for about 1 hour and the students encoded the data from written transcripts. Recommendation results for doctoral program improvement addressed introduction to the program/admission process, class content, and preparation for dissertation/program support. Specifc recommendations included the following: improvement of the formal outreach component of the introduction and admissions process; clear itemized policies; informal portfolio review prior to the admissions process; improvement in the sequence of classes; greater flexibility of summer class offerings; limiting a faculty member's number of advisees; and clarifying the roles of college offices. Sample matrixes uses in the evaluation process are attached. (JB)

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EVALUATING AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DOCTORAL PROGRAM:

Results of a Focus Group Simulation for Educational Leadership Doctoral Students

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AN EVALUATION OF KEY COMPONENTS OF AN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP DOCTORAL PROGRAM

Results for a Focus Group Simulation for
Educational Leadership Doctoral Students

by
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Summer Session II, 1993

AN EVALUATION OF KEY COMPONENTS OF AN EDUCATIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM: Results of a Focus Group Teaching Simulation for Education Doctoral Students

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a focus group simulation with selected members of a doctoral qualitative research class at Northern Arizona University's Center for Excellence in Education (hereafter called NAU/CEE) during the second summer session of 1993.

The focus group methodology was chosen because of the qualitative nature of the research class (EDR 725). As pointed out by authors such as Krueger (1988), the focus group technique allows the educational researcher an opportunity to collect data which is reported from the client's point of view and contains a depth of detail not possible with quantitative methodology.

Procedure

The subjects for this focus-group simulation study consisted of 6 doctoral students in the Educational Leadership sub-speciality who were enrolled in EDR 725 (Qualitative Research) or who were auditing the course during the second summer session of 1993.

Prior to the actual focus-group session, the participants were given instructions about the proposed process of the group. The facilitator (another NAU/CEE doctoral student) informed the respondents that they would be discussing the Educational Leadership doctoral program in terms of perceived strengths, insufficiencies, and recommendations for improvement within three key areas. The three general areas of the program to be discussed were: admissions, program of studies, and the dissertation.

In order to have a structure for presenting and analyzing data, a series of matrices (see blank matrices #1 - 4) were formulated with the same three

columns: strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations. The same three categories were also measured in a survey completed by all 6 respondents and a matrix was developed to present the survey results (see matrix #5).

The actual focus-group simulation was conducted on July 15, 1993, with one of the doctoral students acting as facilitator and another doctoral student scripting and maintaining the taping equipment. The session lasted approximately one hour. Subsequently the students encoded the data derived from the session from written transcripts.

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program: Perceived Strengths, Weaknesses, and Recommendations

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The data analysis/reporting procedures included:

1. Cluster/coding of the focus group data.
2. Presentation of the demographic survey data in a profile sheet (see Demographic Profile).
3. Graphic presentation of the open-ended survey data in a matrix (see Matrix # 5).
4. Graphic presentation of the focus group data in matrix format (see Matrices 1 - 4).

Conclusions

Specific recommendations for doctoral program improvements were proposed in each of the three predetermined general areas. They are briefly outlined in the following section:

Introduction to the Program / Admissions Process

Suggestions included the following:

(1) Improved formal outreach;

(2) California should be able to begin and finish classes in California;

(3) Designation of an admissions advisor;

(4) Clear, itemized policies;

(5) Informal portfolio review prior to admissions process;

(6) Interview guidelines for candidates to preview.

Class Content

Recommendations in this area included:

(1) Improved sequence of classes;

(2) Increased flexibility of summer class offerings;

Preparation for Dissertation / Program Support

Suggestions to strengthen the program overall and the dissertation process specifically included:

(1) Each faculty member in the department should have a limited number of advisees in order to increase accessibility;

(2) The role of other offices on campus (i.e. the Graduate College and the Institutional Research Board) should be made clear earlier in the process;

(3) Point out to applicants the program's emphasis on collaborative learning;

(4) Have uniform of departmental and university policy for all students.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Gender: Males - 4
Females - 2

Average Age: 39.83
Range: 35 - 42

Ethnicity: One African American
Two Caucasians
Three Mexican Americans

Cities of Origin: One Sierra Vista, Arizona
One San Diego, California
Four Phoenix, Arizona

Professional Positions: One Principal
One Mid-level Manager
Two Teachers
Two Assistant Principals

Average Years Experienced in Field: 13.1666
Range: 7 - 19 Years

Years Experienced in Present Position: 6.5
Range: 4 - 13 Years

Length of Time in Educational Leadership Program: 26 months
Range: 12 - 36 months

Expected Time of Graduation: One in 1993
Five in 1994

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Services			
Reputation			
Convenience			

ADMISSIONS PROCESS			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Length of Time			
Portfolio			
Interview			

CLASS CONTENT			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Accessibility			
Quality			

PREPARATION FOR DISSERTATION/PROGRAM SUPPORT			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Procedures			
Program Culture			

SURVEYS			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Admissions			
Program of Study			
Dissertation			

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Services	• Personal attention •NAU was the first to respond to my application • Program provides personalized attention • "I've always been treated like family"		• Improve formal outreach
Reputation	• Best ed. program in the state • Only Ed. Leadership program in the state		
Convenience	• Offering of 8 wk classes • Classes offered throughout the state • Offering 2 1/2 wk classes • Flexible residence requirements		• Ca. students should be able to begin & finish classes in Ca.

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ADMISSIONS PROCESS			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Length of Time	• Accepted 10 yr. old MAT score • Introduction letter self-explanatory	• Lengthy process • Unclear guidelines • Poor delineation of timelines • Poor initial advisement	• Admissions advisor • Initiate an informal portfolio review; 1 mo. response • Clear itemized policies • Timely notification of acceptance or denial of application
Portfolio	• Clear guidelines in introduction letter • Resident faculty will help with process even if off-campus	• Unclear up front what is wanted • Too long turn around; feedback • Not enough assistance to complete	• Improve feedback on portfolio status • Provide clearer definitions • Improve explanation of what wanted • Access to assistance in order to complete
Interview	• Length of time • Non-threatening	• Inconsistent interviewing process	• More than two faculty should interview candidates • Provide interview guidelines for the candidates to preview

CLASS CONTENT			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Accessibility	• 2 1/2 wk. classes • No. of available classes • Quality of instructors • Accessible in Phx. & Tucson	• Overemphasis on traditional K-8 • Much travel & expense for Ca. students • Poor sequencing of classes • Mixed messages given on length of time needed to complete program	• Improve program sequence • Increase no. of flexible class offerrings during the summer
Quality	• Practical info. given • Instruction by P/T & F/T faculty • Program completion • Socratic seminar groupings • Balance between theory & application	• K-8 overemphasis • Stats. courses taught by non-CEE faculty • Not rigorous enough • 2 1/2 wk. classes	• Bring in "giants" we have read about to speak to us, i.e. Senge, Fullan, Yin, etc.

PREPARATION FOR DISSERTATION/PROGRAM SUPPORT			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Procedures	• Dissertation Committee • Faculty support when available	• Student knowledge on the role the Graduate College and the IRB play in the entire process • Inconsistent advisement	• No. of advisees to faculty should be limited • Graduate college & IRB role should be made clear at the beginning of the process
Program Culture	• Students support eachother • Much group work • Research faculty support	• No mention of program emphasis on collaborative learning • Frustration with advisor accessibility, advisement inconsistency, & family support	• Emphasize to applicants the program's emphasis on collaborative learning • Uniform implementation of policy

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SURVEYS			
	Strengths	Weaknesses	Recommendations
Admissions	• User friendly • NAU's reputation • Easy access to the application	• Time consuming • Unclear what wanted in portfolio, i.e. creativity, references • Difficulty obtaining financial assistance	• Admissions advisor to assist applicant with the process • Suggestions for financial assistance
Program of Study	• Cooperation from students who have completed comps • Comps study groups • Some advisors very helpful • Committees work well with students • Some classes meaningful • Instructors are helpful	• Generally not much guidance from advisors • Availability of advisors • Process by which the dissertation committee is selected • Residency requirements • Comps are an obstacle • Politics	• Innovative ways of gaining residency • Consistant student/advisor meetings required • Comps not required • Ca. & Az. comps should be administered equally
Dissertation	• Research design, dissertation seminar and similar classes are helpful in starting the dissertation • Immediate feedback from the professors	• Time consuming	• None at this time • Students surveyed are not all at dissertation stage • Most responses were pending or not applicable